

Photo by the author

How a Creepy Red Wine Called The Prisoner Became Napa Valley's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'

The 18-year-old cult wine brand's new tasting room has vibrating skeletons, bondage pottery, and some pretty damn good wine, too.

Having grown up in Northern California and spent the better part of a decade as a food writer, I've done a fair amount of wine tasting. I've made pit stops in *Sideways* country on my way up and down the state, spent numerous bachelorette parties giggling and spitting into sterling silver dump buckets, and even visited the Loire Valley with my parents when I was a kid (honestly, pretty boring when you're 11). In my head, all those wineries blur together into one big, Tuscan-inspired mansion on an immaculately manicured lawn, surrounded by planters full of geraniums and gargoyles winking at me, knowing that later I will probably fall asleep without brushing my teeth.

But on all those visits, I'd never seen a vibrating skeleton made of graphite. This is a first.

I'm staring at San Francisco-based artist Agelio Batle's "[Ash Dancer](#)," a suicidal sculpture that, through its placement on a massive sheet of white paper atop a violently trembling table, draws itself to death at an agonizingly slow pace. It's on display at the [The Prisoner Wine Company](#)'s new winery, which opened in November in St. Helena, California. It's a massive, 40,000-square-foot facility that looks like if *Trading Spaces* gave Dave Navarro and Ai Weiwei \$50 million and let them go wild on the interior decorating, and I mean that as a compliment.

This all makes sense: A weird (but immensely popular) cult wine deserves an unconventional (but still massive and opulent) facility. But there's a feeling that this is like seeing a punk band play a stadium.



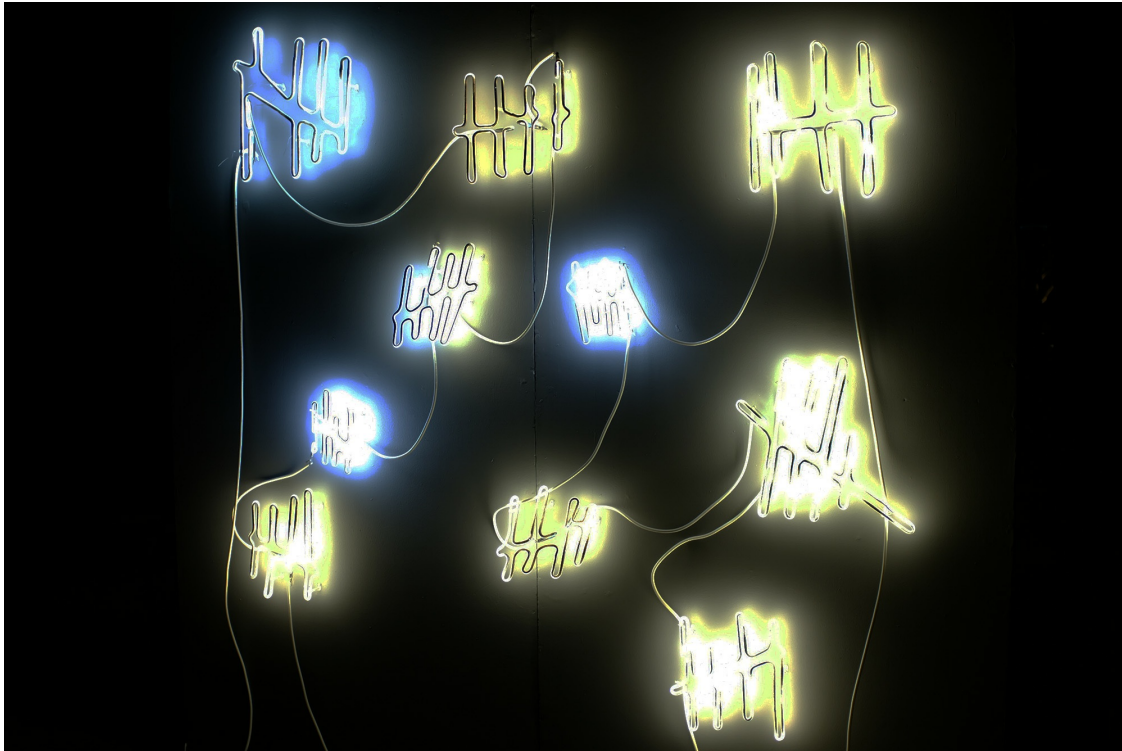
Agelio Batle's "Ash Dancer" on display at The Prisoner Wine Company's tasting room. Photo by the author.

The Prisoner has always marched to the beat of its own drum. It can be difficult to explain, in 2019, why this red wine with a creepy label has been so game-changing—but that's because the game looks so different now thanks to its influence. Everything from its label to its composition has been a rebellion against the old establishment of Napa Valley wines, but—like beet salad or, say, Freddie Prinze Jr.'s character in *She's All That*—it has found widespread appeal despite being darker and funkier than its contemporaries. Now, its new tasting room is a tangible embodiment of that success.

In 2000, a few years after completing a study-abroad program in Italy, then-27-year-old Dave Phinney was experimenting with winemaking, and in his tinkering, came up with a zinfandel-forward red blend.

"It was a bit of a—I don't want to say a mistake—but a mistake," Phinney tells me over the phone. "2000 was a very challenging harvest."

It was a cold, wet year, and Phinney found himself with a hodgepodge of messed-up grapes: zinfandel, charbono, petite sirah. The zinfandel had quite a bit of residual sugar, so Phinney threw it together with some of his dryer stuff, and soon came to realize that the blend wasn't half bad.



A custom neon sign mirrors the scratch marks on the bottles of Derange. Photo by the author.

His mother, who was an art curator, had gifted him a Francisco Goya etching at a young age—yes, the same Goya responsible for Saturn Devouring His Son, the freakiest painting from your college art history course. This was a scribbled portrayal of a bound, frightened prisoner, from his series *The Disasters of War*, and looked more like something you'd find on a Converge album cover than a wine label. But when the first 385 cases were ready for sale and needed a label, he looked up in his office and saw that Goya etching. Done deal.



Photo by Michael Kovac/Getty Images for The Prisoner Wine Company

The visuals were a bit grim, but most everyone agreed: The wine was delicious—easy to drink without being too sweet, complex without being too challenging. In 2008, [WineGeeks](#) described it as “a hedonistic blend of Zinfandel, Cabernet, Syrah, Petite Sirah, Charbono, a Kitchen Sink, Grenache and a steering wheel from a '68 Cuda.” (if you need a visual on the latter, it’s a [cool-looking car](#).)

The wine’s popularity soared, and the brand expanded. By the time Phinney sold the brand in 2008, it was producing 85,000 cases annually. Now, after being acquired by the Fortune 500 company Constellation Brands in 2016 for \$285 million, The Prisoner is the number-one luxury red blend “by a huge margin,” says Logan Michaud, Senior Wine Education Specialist for The Prisoner Wine Company, with 180,000 cases produced each year. He adds that the company is essentially capped out at that number, due to grower contracts, quality control, and the constraints of sourcing the right fruit in Napa, but that it’s at a sweet spot of supply and demand.

“Though it may be a push [for] classic Old World lovers of Bordeaux or Rhône Valley reds to put this one on the dinner table, there is a new generation of wine drinkers who can’t get enough of this style of wine,” [wrote wine critic Wilfred Wong](#) in his review of The Prisoner’s 2016 vintage.

Its delicious but unstuffy flavor is essential, but The Prisoner’s once-controversial aesthetic is equally integral to its success. It might retail for just

under 50 bucks a bottle (in its early days, it was \$25), but its branding conveys a suffering, solitary man, possible a criminal, instead of a chateau on a hill, or a hunting expedition of old white guys and their English Pointers. There are anecdotes about wine sellers being asked if they could obscure or even soak off its label for worries that Goya's sinister imagery could offend dinner table guests.



The Prisoner and Blindfold, a white blend. Photo by the author.

Phinney grew up in LA in the 80s, embedded in its surfing, skateboarding, and punk rock scenes. His parents were both professors, and frequently took him to museums. "I had this juxtaposition of highbrow fine art and graffiti, essentially."

"We're never trying to appeal to anybody. I'm not going after Millennials or Gen Xers or 85-year-old grandmothers," Phinney says of his wines. "I'm settled on something I like and I can stand behind, and hopefully, people like it. It's never meant to be dark or edgy or disruptive, but maybe that's a byproduct."

A retrospective on the wine published on VinePair last year argues, "What Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' did for indie rock in the 1990s, Phinney's Prisoner has done for California reds in the new millennium." That may sound hyperbolic, but not to those in Napa Valley's insular but influential wine world.

Liz Thach is the Distinguished Professor of Wine and a Professor of Management at Sonoma State University; she also holds the title of Master of Wine from the Institute of Masters of Wine in London. She remembers the release of The Prisoner as a much-needed revolution in Napa.

"When The Prisoner came out, to me personally, I thought it was a really good thing. Things needed to be shaken up a bit, and it was a disruptive brand," Thach tells me. "It created a lot of buzz and a lot of excitement. Since then there have been some other brands that have been trying to do the same thing, but I think The Prisoner was the first to do this. And it's been healthy for the wine industry."

Swap "The Prisoner" for "Nirvana" and "wine" for "music," and indeed, we could be talking about Seattle in the early 90s.

One big change that The Prisoner brought was a shift away from grape varietal worship. Young people rarely care what grape they're drinking, as long as it tastes good. The Prisoner is meant to be consumed just as enjoyably outside of mealtimes as it is next to a medium-rare duck breast, and has a sense of pleasure for pleasure's sake.



The dining hall in TPWC's new facility. Photo by the author.

"You see a trend today where a lot of brands are chasing that 'consume now' style," Michaud says. "Only a smidge of the market ages and cellars wine." With most Millennials still seeing home ownership as a pipe dream, casually building a wine cellar feels like a laughably distant luxury.

It's a great date wine even if your date hates talking about wine. It seems like the kind of wine Johnny Depp might accidentally spend 30 grand on every month. A 2011 Forbes article suggested The Prisoner as "what to get that client who is about to do some time in Club Fed for a white-collar crime." That is to say, it *felt* luxurious without touting itself as such, and without being boring.

“At the time it came out, everyone was doing the same blended red wines with big tannins and big acidity and big richness. They all needed food. Then, The Prisoner came along and it was unabashed easy drinking. As a blend, you didn’t even need to know what was in it,” says Michaud.

“The Prisoner really unleashed a new era to some extent in California wine,” adds Virginie Boone, a contributing editor at *Wine Enthusiast* focusing on California wines. “People only need to remember the name of the wine, not the specific variety per se, or vintage. They don’t have to overthink whether what they’re asking for is accepted by wine insiders. They can just like the wine.”



Guests at the opening party for TPWC's new digs. Photo by the author.

But being popular and being cool aren’t the same thing; just look at Facebook, or Imagine Dragons. Non-oenophiles have little patience to read yet another story about this vineyard’s soil composition and that imported grape, about a vintage they’ll never be able to afford or a new line of rose being marketed toward [name your demographic]. Writing about wine in a way that doesn’t make even a food editor’s eyes glaze over can be... difficult.

While the rest of food and beverage writing has rapidly modernized over the past few decades—surely due to increased representation from writers and chefs of more races, ages, gender representations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and subcultural underpinnings than ever before—wine has remained left in the dust. Restaurants have raised their ceilings, dropped their

dress codes, and moved away from the “French = fancy” model, but the vast majority of wineries have stuck with their stone lion statues and gaudy floral arrangements.

The breakout success of The Prisoner in the past two decades seems to have put some of those dinosaurs on their toes almost single-handedly. Copycat red blends with sexy labels—for instance, E. & J. Gallo’s zinfandel-based Apothic Red and Ménage à Trois’ merlot-forward Midnight—began to pop up like mushrooms.

And in addition to its namesake red blend, The Prisoner Wine Company has in recent years expanded its line to more similarly brooding wines such as Blindfold, The Snitch, and Syndrome—a white blend, chardonnay, and rosé respectively. There’s also Derange, a \$100 red blend whose dark bottle is marked with hundreds of thin scratches, like the wall of a cell; Eternally Silenced, a fruity, floral pinot that has black wax cascading halfway down the label; and Saldo, a minimalist zinfandel.

TPWC’s new facility seems to have an on-the-nose (no pun intended) awareness that traditional wine tasting doesn’t always do enough to impress the young, alt bourgeoisie, with their Parachute sheets and vinyl collections. Yes, they would love some rosé, but they also want vibrating suicidal skeletons!



Eternally Silenced. Photo by the author.

While sleek and well-appointed, TPWC’s winery has plenty of goth-y details that nod to that Goya etching. The dome lights were made to look the

ominous helmet over an electric chair. Rows of shackles hang behind the bar in a striking display. (I ask Michaud if anyone has been offended by the cheeky take on prison chic. “Not really,” he shrugs.)

The facility offers more than just wine tasting. After staring for way too long at “Ash Dancer,” I admire the wares of ceramicist Amanda Wright. Her Servitude collection is an assortment of high-end matte black pottery adorned with studs and spikes and BDSM-inspired buckles and harnesses. She says the line was inspired by hardware and her love of things in kitchen drawers—safety pins and screws—and by, you know, punk rock and dog collars. (Guess we’re not going to discuss the *50 Shades of Grey* vibe, but maybe we don’t need to.)

Wright is featured in The Makery, a portion of the winery showcasing crafts from local artists in mini shops—“cells,” if you will. A gift shop made Goya. A standard tasting (called “The Line-Up Tasting,” prison-style) is \$40, but for \$65, guests can take “The Makery Journey,” where they can also shop for specialty products from the artisans. For 30 bucks more, they can indulge in “The Makery Experience,” where they can feast on a five-course menu that includes rock-seared wagyu and goat cheese agnolotti. This is where I’d want to go on a date with Dracula. (Hopefully, he pays; I want that wagyu.)

After selling off The Prisoner a decade ago, Phinney has continued his work at Orin Swift Cellars, where he partnered with EJ Gallo and leaned into the creative side rather than dealing with the business stuff. (“I don’t have to worry about sales; I don’t need to worry about economics. I just need to make wine and come up with new cool labels, and I have zero oversight,” he says.) The label of Orin Swift’s highly rated petite sirah, Machete, is adorned with a topless woman carrying a long blade away from an old white Cadillac. Bordeaux blend Papillon’s name is spelled out on knuckle tattoos. The winery’s labels are also available as skateboard decks.



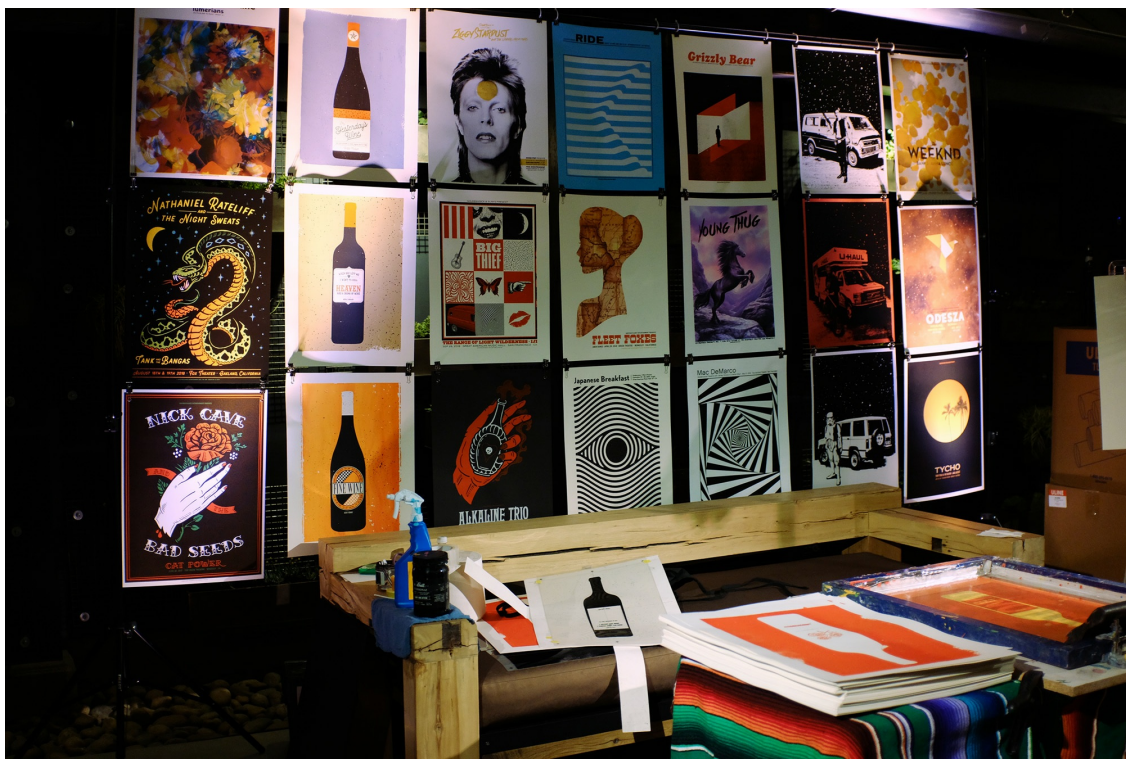
Amanda Wright displays her ceramics in The Makery. Photo by the author.

The Director of Winemaking position at TPWC is currently held by Chrissy Whitman, a dry, down-to-Earth winemaker with a big laugh. “One thing that’s great about the Prisoner is that there are no rules,” she tells us as we taste. “Any vineyard you see, any grapes, we’re free to make wine with.” While keen on grape talk like any other winemaker, she also tells us that about eight of the ten beers consumed during harvest are Modelo.

Winemakers: They’re just like us! While we’re used to hearing Michelin-starred chefs talk about how they love cheap beer and Takis, those little things remain refreshing in the wine industry, which still often feels wealth-focused, elitist, and hierarchical to outsiders. The current team at the The Prisoner seems very aware of the boredom and exclusivity that has historically turned many young people off.

“It’s repetitive,” Michaud says. “You go wine tasting at three different places and taste 20 [cabernet sauvignons] in one day. So we’re showcasing what else Napa can do—giving people something different.”

While there is one cabernet in the winery’s arsenal, called Cuttings, eye-rolling at the grape varietal’s ubiquity in the Valley seems to be something of a hobby at TPWC. “Common theme in Napa: Let’s tear out everything that’s cool and different and turn it into cabernet sauvignon,” Michaud laughs. Even subpar cabernet sauvignon is getting twice as much acreage as any other grape in Napa Valley, he says.



An opening party for the facility featured live silkscreening by poster artist Lil Tuffy. Photo by the author.

The Prisoner is certainly no longer an underdog, but in many ways, it still thinks like one. Rules are as bad as endless fields of cabernet sauvignon. Guests, please have a red something-something and enjoy the bondage pottery.

For now, I'm sipping Thorn, a jammy-smelling and supremely drinkable merlot. (Sorry, Miles from *Sideways*.) The crackers and charred eggplant dip I've been fueling up on are long gone. It's 10:41 AM, and I'm a bit drunk. Some things about wine-tasting never change, I guess.



Photos by Jack Newton

How to Order the Best Wine, According to Night+Market's Kris and Sarah Yenbamroong

Pro tips from the Los Angeles-based duo, plus the 16 wines you should be drinking right now.

Kris and Sarah Yenbamroong have had a "very Loire-focused relationship" for the last six months.

As the chef and owner of Los Angeles' Night+Market empire, Kris may be best known for his (literally and figuratively) spicy, inventive Thai food served in a (literally and figuratively) colorful setting, which has been winning over critics—as well as locals, travelers, and celebrities both food world and Hollywood, from Rene Redzepi to Daft Punk to Gwyneth Paltrow—since 2010. But when he and his wife/partner Sarah think of what makes their restaurants special, it kind of comes down to the wine.

"I look at Night+Market restaurants as wine places," Kris told me over glasses of Champagne when he and Sarah visited New York in April.

"You can go to any Thai restaurant in town and have a Tsingtao with your meal. When you come to Night+Market, maybe you should have a chenin blanc instead," Sarah added.

When Kris and Sarah come back to New York (Kris went to NYU, and the couple met at Corner Bistro in the West Village when they were both living on the East Coast years ago), one of the things they most look forward to is stopping into laid-back, wine-focused restaurants like Four Horsemen and Wildair. The food at these places might be delicious, too—sumptuous little tartares, burrata-smothered toasts—but it's meant to complement, not outshine, your glass or bottle of choice. While they're both well-seasoned oenophiles, Kris and Sarah are happy to sit back and take recommendations from the staff, since that type of experience is hard for them to find in LA.

"There are places right now in LA that technically have good wines but are sort of like... douchey. I don't know how else to say it," Kris told me. "When I go to a place and get a sense that the proprietor could just as easily be selling used Chevrolet parts, or like, kiddie pools, or vintage Pez dispensers or something, what the fuck?"



The duo deserves a vacation, too. For the past year, they've been busy opening up Night+Market's third location in Venice. And after hustling for eight years to keep customers happy, Kris wants to have a little fun again.

"In terms of what we're doing now in Venice, [Night+Market Sahn] is identifiable as a Night+Market restaurant, but it's different. We loosened up a little bit with Song, our Silver Lake restaurant, and with Venice we want to loosen up a little bit more," Kris said. "My idea for it is 'cocaine Thai.'"

And no, he doesn't mean a literal dusting of blow on your noodles. Instead, he's been taking inspiration from the lively, buzzy restaurants of LA in the 80s, the Wolfgang Pucks and the Nobus. Enough with the quest for ultimate authenticity: Bring on the California decadence. "We're in fucking Venice, California; we're not in northern Thailand. What's relevant here isn't necessarily relevant there," Kris explained. "At a certain point I wanted to do [Thai food] in a super rigid way, but then it got to a point where it wasn't fun anymore. Running a restaurant is a super headache enough. You might as well have some fun while you're doing it."

Damn right. Kris's dream is for wine-lovers to "come in, order a bottle of wine, drink it, and leave," but he wants the food to keep guests on their toes, too. Maybe that means something outside the box and not particularly Thai, like a grilled rib-eye smothered in housemade XO sauce.

Regardless of what's on your plate, Kris and Sarah both hope you get groovy with your wine selection, at all of their restaurants. They have a refreshingly straightforward strategy to picking wine when dining out, and one that's easy to emulate.

Step one: Find a restaurant with a staff that knows what the hell they're doing. That might be somewhere casual and unpretentious like Wildair, or it might be somewhere buttoned-up and Michelin-starred, like Le Bernardin (to name a couple favorites on their New York to-do list). But when you seek out a spot that is known for its wine program, finding something tasty "is like throwing darts," Sarah says. And don't be afraid to ask for help picking something. "If I came in completely blind, if it was my first time, I would talk to the people," Kris says. He knows his wine. If he can throw some questions to the staff, so can you.

Step two: Keep it simple, stupid. That's Kris's motto for ordering wine, and also a good philosophy for steering clear of cloudy descriptions of "ripe blackberries" and "wet moss." At their best, these types of descriptions provide context for people, but at worst, they alienate people. Instead, start with the two most important qualities: body and sweetness. Do you want something big, rich, and full-bodied, or something light and thirst-quenching? Do you want something dry or sweet? Start with these variables instead of "white or red," and you're more likely to find something that hits the spot. Think of it as the board game *Guess Who*—flicking down the different characteristics you don't like, and keeping your eye on the ones you do. "Maybe to start out, you could say, 'I'm looking for a zippy, bright, white,'" Kris says. Then tell your sommelier or server your price range, and let them know what other grapes and regions you know you like. Something that Sarah likes about Wildair is that they don't list the grapes on the menu, because "it forces the guest to have a conversation." Yes, that's a good thing, and it doesn't mean you're wine-

clueless—it means you care what you’re about to drink.



Step three: When you’re traveling, take a “when in Rome” approach. Of drinking in New York, Kris just goes for stuff he can’t find in LA. Or, pick a region (any region!), dig into it, and see how you feel. Sarah recently told Kris that she wanted to taste wines from Etna. “Italy was too broad, so I just picked one region. Then I can figure out that region from ordering wines, what I like and don’t like about it.”

Most importantly, Kris says, "It shouldn't really require research to enjoy food, or wine. You should be able to have an open, visceral experience with it."

Here are the wines they enjoyed on their recent trip to New York. (We're pretty jealous.)

1. **Les Foulards Rouge** at Wildair

"Whenever I visit New York, I book an Airbnb within blocks of Wildair. Wildair isn't just a wine bar, it's a way of life. We landed and went straight there and ordered this wine. We pour Jean-Francois Niqu's red wines at my restaurant, but I had never tasted the white. A lot of what I like about his red wines exist in this white. Easy and elegant, depth of flavor but with high drinkability."

2. **Le Brutal de Jean Marc** at Wildair

"Completely floored by this wine. My suggestion: if you see a 'Brutal!!!' wine on a wine list, order it. Essentially, Brutal is an open source concept where likeminded winemakers bottle under the Brutal label: a wine that is wild, pure, unadulterated, and brutal. Technically, anyone is welcome to do it, so long as they get approval from the 'committee,' and the rules are simple: extreme wine made in one barrel and zero sulfur added. The wine may be white, red, rose, orange... doesn't matter."



3. **Marseille Amaro Forthave Spirits** at [Wildair](#)

"I don't order amaro that often, but even so, it somehow always arrives when I need it most. The server explained that the botanical spirit had notes of honey and cinnamon which is lovely to hear, but all I know is that it made me more fucked up but settled my very full stomach."

4. **Zerlina, from Domaine L'Octavin** at [Ten Bells](#)

"Left dinner at Wildair pretty hammered, but met up with Randy Moon for more wine. Randy ordered this bottle at Ten Bells. Blend of Trousseau with Pinot Noir. Lively, light-bodied. An example of 'energizing' wine. This gave me enough of a boost to stumble to the next stop on our itinerary."

5. Els Jelpins Rose at The Flower Shop

"If I were still single, I'd go here to pick up girls, eat a good meal, and drink great wine. This was a blend of sumoll and garnacha and drank like a very, very light-bodied red. A cerebral wine."

6. Vignobles Bulliat Morgon at Lucien

"This is my mother-in-law's favorite spot, and my wife and I met her for a glass of wine before our reservation at Le Bernardin. She insisted I order a bottle for the table, so I chose something I figured they could enjoy after we left. It's parent wine. Approachable and inoffensive. And, it goes with anything on a French bistro menu (I already knew she orders the filet mignon)."

7. Bérèche "40 mois de cave" Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs Champagne at Le Bernardin

"We weren't celebrating anything in particular, but this place demands Champagne. I told the sommelier I was in the mood for something rich and toasty. This particular wine is aged 40 months in-bottle. Sarah drank most of it because I'm a geezer and bubbles give me heartburn."

8. 1978 Stony Hill Gewurztraminer at Le Bernardin

"I first tasted Stony Hill wines at Lou Wine Shop in LA. I immediately planned a trip to Napa to visit the winery. The wine was vibrant and alive. It was the most beautiful dark amber color and very soothing after the Champagne. I feel like no one's looking for a blockbuster gewurztraminer, and we should be. Chose this bottle because I wanted to take advantage of Le Bernardin's deep cellar, and wanted something that would add a different dimension to a very decadent and rich meal."

9. Spritzette at Frenchette

"I had to take a full 24 hours between eating and drinking after Le Bernardin. I stayed in the Airbnb watching *Homeland* and *Billions* in my underwear to recuperate and to prepare for our meal at Frenchette. Our pal Arnaud, the host with the most, started us off with some spritzes made with pet-nat. That brought me back to life."

10. Organic Anarchy from Aci Urbajs at Frenchette

"I love that Jorge always asks, 'maceration or no maceration?' when you tell him you want to start with a white. He chose this skin contact white from Slovenia. Hardcore."

11. Trousseau from Domaine de Marnes Blanches at Frenchette

"I drink a lot of light-bodied red from the Loire, but it also excites me to drink a light red that's not gamay and not from the Loire. Fruity, but not big and not showy. You get the fruit qualities, but it's light and super easy to drink. The fruit aspect can make a wine approachable, and I'm all about approachable wine."

12. **Le Balaise from Gilles and Catherine Vergé** at [Frenchette](#)

"Old-vine chardonnay. Don't remember too much about this one."

13. **Domaine de la Tournelle Macvin du Jura** at [Frenchette](#)

"Jorge made the right call to serve this for dessert. labeled a 'vin de liqueur,' this is very rich and loads of natural sweetness, which I appreciate. My wife and I were properly toasted."

14. **Jean-Yves Peron "Les Barrieux"** at [Contra](#)

"Yes, more orange wine. Changed a lot after opening, which is why I try to order bottles over glass pours when I go out to dinner. It's a treat to witness a wine evolve over the course of a meal."

15. **Les Foulards Rouges "Soif du Mal Blanc" and Yvon Metras Fleurie** at [Contra](#)

"OK, I just told you that I order bottles, but Sarah and I wanted to have a glass of red at the end of our meal, but couldn't commit to another bottle. So we each got a glass. Plus, when a restaurant has dope glass pours like this, you shouldn't resist."

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16. **Catherine & Pierre Breton's Bourgueil "Les Perrières" 1993** at [Momofuku Ko Bar](#)

"We knew we'd order the classic cold fried chicken, and this was a nice one to drink alongside that. Earthy and savory. 1993 was 25 years ago. I feel old, but this wine is still alive and well. Side note—I felt redeemed since a few weeks back I had opened a 2006 Breton wine that was totally DOA."

17. **Jean-Baptiste Souillard Cornas** at [Momofuku Ko Bar](#)

"Out of my comfort zone, but I am never going to force my wine preferences on a restaurant with a list like this. Is this any everyday guzzler? No. But I don't eat foie gras duck pie every day, either."

18. **Dauvissat Irancy** at [Momofuku Ko Bar](#)

"Red wine from a famous Chablis producer. This was delicious and makes me want to commit to trying more [wine from] Irancy."

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